



September 23, 2019

Dear Loudoun County School Board and Administration,

On behalf of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), we commend and enthusiastically support Superintendent Williams in his request that the Loudoun community *"...engage in the disruption and dismantling of white supremacy, systemic racism, and hateful language and actions based on race, religion, country of origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or ability. LCPS rejects racist and other hateful behavior and language, recognizing that it encourages discrimination, hatred, oppression, and violence."*

We also note that LCPS is working to ensure the use of diverse text collections for all K-12 English Language Arts Classrooms, and applaud steps being taken to review and provide culturally sensitive learning materials for our student body.

To assist with LCPS's commitment to providing a "safe, empathetic, respectful and supportive learning environment for all," SEAC requests that the LCPS Administration and School Board investigate the Balanced Literacy program of Fountas and Pinnell's (F&P) Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI). LLI is the LCPS Department of Instruction's preferred program and is utilized for English Language Learners and struggling readers in all grades.

On May 2019, an article entitled, "The hidden curriculum of reading intervention: a critical content analysis of Fountas & Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention" was published online in the Journal of Curriculum Studies (Deani Thomas & Jeanne Dyches, 2019).¹ The study examined the content of the Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) Teal system (utilized in grades 6-12). Points of concern raised in the study are as follows:

1. "...This implicit message makes even more troubling the decisions of the publisher and authors to construct mostly deficit-laden stories in which people of Colour are portrayed as thieves, misfits, drop-outs, drug addicts, fatherless children abandoned by their mothers, and hopelessly lacking a will to live. Conversely, the emphasis on Whites in the nonfiction books implies that the 'true' stories of Whites are legitimate, real, and worthy of telling. This implicit message makes problematic the choices of the publisher and authors to seek out and tell stories of Whites framed only as successful, ethical, and heroic. The collection of books and accompanying lesson scripts simultaneously pathologize people of Colour and valorize Whites thereby affirming dominant social groups and lending well to the maintenance of dysconscious racism (King, 1991)."
2. "Racial gaps in reading achievement have been long-acknowledged and widely studied, and the persistence of racial gaps continues to be documented by the National Center for Educational Statistics in the United States. It is a reasonable assumption that students of Colour are disproportionately represented in the target audience for the F&P LLI system because people of Colour are disproportionately identified as 'struggling readers' (Fryer, 2010). **The underlying messages conveyed through the collection of books analyzed for the present study could have disastrous consequences for the self-concept of students of Colour, the perceptions of teachers working with students of Colour, and the perceptions of White students in reading intervention**" (King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Love, 2004). pg 611

¹ Deani Thomas & Jeanne Dyches (2019) The hidden curriculum of reading intervention: a critical content analysis of Fountas & Pinnell's leveled literacy intervention, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 51:5, 601-618, DOI: 10.1080/00220272.2019.1616116

3. "Our critical content analysis of Level U of the F&P LLI Teal system revealed a hidden curriculum that perpetuates majoritarian narratives. The collection of twenty student books and accompanying lesson scripts presents stories in which Whites are celebrated while people of Colour are demeaned and relegated to the margins. Our study adds to the existing body of critical curriculum literature by bringing into focus curriculum targeted at the vulnerable population of students labelled struggling readers." pg 612

LCPS has heavily invested in F&P LLI for the remediation of English Language Learners² and also for Tier 2 and 3 instruction for struggling readers in all grades.³ As a example of LCPS investment, according to the FY 19 LCPS Sole Source Contracts, at least \$400,000 was earmarked to purchase LLI materials for the Middle and High Schools.⁴ We do not want LCPS to promote the use of programs that reinforce these harmful biases throughout everyday learning activities. While the LCPS Department of Instruction has been steadfast towards its Balanced Literacy and Leveled Approach to reading instruction and remediation; we urge the Department and School Division to prioritize and honor the needs of the "student population and those around them." We do not want any of our students to feel that our school system is perpetuating bias through the inaccurate and offensive messages in these materials.

Furthermore, while the above-mentioned study only looked at the Teal System, Level U, it would not be surprising to find the hidden curriculum throughout F&P LLI for all grades. As such, we ask that a LCPS convene a task force of diverse stakeholders, including parent members from MSAAC and SEAC to conduct a thorough review, investigation and exploration of all LLI systems (Orange: Kindergarten, Green: Grade 1, Blue: Grade 2, Red: Grade 3, Gold: Grade 4, Purple: Grade 5 and Teal: Grade 6-12+) to identify any cultural insensitivities and mischaracterizations, whether overt or covert, and find culturally appropriate alternative sources.

While the primary reason for this letter is to request a review of a racially and culturally biased curriculum, we also remind LCPS of its duty to meet the needs of students with disabilities. "Culturally responsive and diverse texts" must also include **equitable access** to books. This means that e-books, digital books and audiobooks should be correspondingly found and accessed just as easily as paper books in all classroom libraries.

² "Therefore, to assist students attain English proficiency and to have equal opportunity to meaningfully and equally participate in the district's programs, the Title III program implements the best practices of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), the state adopted WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards for both content specialty area classes, the Imagine Learning Language and Literacy program, and the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) reading intervention program." (LCPS FY17 Budget, pg. 335)

Likewise, the Title III program collaborates with both the Special Education Department and Reading Department in offering Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) training, a Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention program, to our high needs elementary ELLs in order to bridge the literacy gaps of these students. (LCPS FY17 budget, pg. 336)

Title III funds purchased Red and Gold Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) kits and training to 16 high needs elementary schools and to two Pathways Facilitators. (LCPS FY17, pg. 337)

Increase use of the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) program and training to 4 secondary schools and continue to provide follow up training to current schools utilizing this program. (LCPS Budget FY17, pg. 338)

<https://www.lcps.org/cms/lib/VA01000195/Centricity/domain/64/fy%2017%20budget/FY17%20LCPS%20Adopted%20Budget.pdf>

³ Provided training on the use and implementation of Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), an intensive, small-group, supplementary literacy intervention for the 12 schools that demonstrated need based on student performance. FY20 pg. 190

<https://www.lcps.org/cms/lib/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/64/FY20%20Budget/1-16-19%20Proposed%20Budget%20Updated/FY20%20Superintendents%20Proposed%20Budget%201-15-19.pdf>

⁴https://www.lcps.org/cms/lib/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/64/FY19%20Budget/04_12_18%20SB%20Q_A/FY19%20Reconciliation%20Presentation.pdf

A main goal of classroom libraries is to provide access to texts to encourage reading. However, as Daniel Willingham writes, “What prompts a teen to choose reading over a different activity during her leisure time? Several factors would contribute, surely. Reading will hold little appeal if a student has trouble decoding or has problems with comprehension.”⁵ Of note, is that it also appears that the research regarding access to books and reading proficiency is not as rigorous as indicated by LCPS.

“Limiting my comments to rigorous studies conducted with elementary students that looked at reading achievement, it’s evident that average payoffs were small (and non-existent in some of the studies). In other words, you might see learning improvements from your new programs, but it’s unlikely—and if there are payoffs, they are likely to be small and, perhaps, intangible.”⁶

Struggling readers already feel vulnerable, embarrassed, anxious and apprehensive in the school environment and at home because of their disability. SEAC routinely receives feedback from the community that LCPS’ language and messaging come across as blaming, shaming and judging students and parents for somehow not providing proper reading materials in accessible formats. For example, the underlying message of this recent statement was interpreted by many in the dyslexia community as deflecting responsibility for teaching literacy from the school to the student and parents, “Access to books in the home, school, and classroom has a strong correlation with reading proficiency. Students who read more also have stronger vocabulary, background knowledge, and empathy.” It also suggests that students who have difficulty reading also have a poor vocabulary, general knowledge-base, and are prone to be less empathic, all of which have been disproven by peer reviewed research.

Inclusion of all students, regardless of race, religion, country of origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or ability is of paramount importance to our diverse community. We urge LCPS to take all the steps and discipline necessary to put those words into action with respect to the content, quality, accessibility and cultural appropriateness of an inclusive curriculum and materials.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our feedback and recommendations and look forward to working together to ensure that LCPS is a welcoming, culturally sensitive and inclusive environment for all students.

Sincerely,

The Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) Executive Committee

Cc: Katrechia Nolen, MSAAC Chair

⁵ <https://www.cdi.org/articles/for-the-love-of-reading-engaging-students-in-a-lifelong-pursuit/>

⁶ <https://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/books-on-buses-and-book-in-a-bag-book-access-and-reading>